

Joan had this past week off for spring break, so like many Hoosiers we headed south to warmer climates, to the farmhouse in Orange County. Joan needed the break. The school children have been restless and easily agitated. One of them came to her, crying because he'd left his lunch box on the school bus. She asked him what it looked like, and he said, "It's long and yellow and has a number on the side." That is a child in need of a break, and so does his librarian, so off we went.

We noticed the first daffodils in bloom just south of Bedford and when we left the highway and took the country roads, we could see where the old homesteads had been by the clusters of daffodils that still emerge from winter's tomb, though the houses and barns are long gone. After the snow and bitter cold of this past winter, it is hard to believe anything can live, but we should never underestimate the yearning to come alive.

We've been thinking about the psychologist Abraham Maslow and the traits of self-actualized, or soul-awakened, people. These are people who live at their utmost capacity, live at 100%. These traits include a clear perception of reality, acceptance of self and others, spontaneity, a focus on problems and not on self, a need for privacy, can act with autonomy, appreciate the basic pleasures of life, are creative, and tend to be nonconformists.

There are five other characteristics left, which we'll cover in the weeks ahead, but I want to add another characteristic today. Abraham Maslow didn't include this one, but he would have if he had lived long enough to think about it. He died of a heart attack at the age of 62, while jogging, which is why I don't jog.

The characteristic of self-actualized people I want to add was inspired by this morning's gospel reading. Self-actualized, or soul-awakened, people are life-giving. That is, they are not only fully alive themselves, they have a way of making those around them want to be full of life also. Their presence, their aliveness, is a challenge to our own aliveness. And you know what I mean, for if you stop and think for a moment of someone who is fully and vitally alive, when you are in their presence, you come alive, too. They radiate life, and that life reverberates and echoes within you, and you come alive, too.

Maybe you were slogging along, with no passion for anything, you were existing, but that was all, then you encountered someone who was so fully alive they brought you to life, also. You never knew you could be so fully alive, then you encountered this person and you became fully alive, too. Now was Lazarus dead? Had his heart stopped beating? We don't know, it can't be proven, and it doesn't matter. I've known people, and you have too, who could walk and talk and eat and speak and were dead as doornails. There was no life about them. Maybe this was the case with Lazarus. I don't know. No one knows.

Whenever we encounter a miracle story in the Bible, we must remember something very important: these stories were told in order to reveal something about the central figure of the story, in this case, Jesus. And what does this story tell us about Jesus? That he was a giver of life. This is the gospel in a sentence: Jesus brings life, and when we live as he did, we will bring life, too.

When we live with the courage of Jesus, we will bring life.

When we live with the moral clarity of Jesus, we will bring life.

When we live with compassion for the outcast, we will bring life.

When we live with a passion for justice, we will bring life.

When we live with a love for the enemy, we will bring life.

When we live with active compassion for the least of these, we will bring life.

For too long the church has taught that the purpose of Christianity was to get us into heaven. Sometimes I think that theology, that priority, was an invention of fearful men unable to make their peace with human limits and mortality. But I say the priority of the Christian life is for us receive life, and having received it, to be like Jesus and bring life, give life, to have our aliveness bring aliveness to others. Many of us have lately been enlivened by the example and leadership of Pope Francis, because we see in him an aliveness that is bringing life to others. We see, in others less famous, indeed in the lives of some in this room, this same winsome life, and when we are around them, we feel alive ourselves.

Here is the crux of the matter:

There are some people who, when they encounter others, are content to let them stay put, wither, and die.

And there are other people who, when they encounter others, pull them to their feet so they may rise and walk.

We know what kind of person Jesus was.

What kind of person are you?